

## **Australian Chaplains at Gallipoli: role, impact and influence**

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### **Abstract**

This study of the role, impact and influence of Australian chaplains during the Gallipoli campaign identifies the formal and informal roles played by chaplains, and how their work was perceived and received by the men they served. It challenges a popular view, sometimes articulated in publications, that the Australian soldier was indifferent to spiritual things and to the work of the chaplains. Instead it shows how chaplains played a vital role in providing a host of support services which could greatly impact soldier morale and emotional wellbeing. The myth that Australian soldiers were not particularly religious is nuanced by a demonstration that many soldiers took their faith seriously, and the ministrations of the chaplains benefitted the troops. It also demonstrates that the calibre of the individual chaplain was key to ensuring the success or otherwise of their role in maintaining the spiritual mission and morale of the troops, and shows in what specific ways chaplains could most impact the soldiers under their care.

### **Introduction: The Role of AIF Chaplains**

The role of chaplains in the newly-raised Australian Imperial Force was adapted from the British military tradition, which had evolved over time though it remained uncodified. Unlike the UK, whose State-based Anglican and Presbyterian religions dominated the chaplaincy, Australia had no official religion, so each brigade was allocated four chaplains, roughly in proportion to the religious affiliations of the general population. Hence each brigade received two Anglicans, one Roman Catholic, and one Presbyterian or Methodist, the appointees being clergy selected by their own denominations.<sup>1</sup> In some cases a representative of other small sects such as Baptists, Congregationalists, or The Salvation Army, was appointed instead of the second Anglican.

Padres, as chaplains were popularly named, were intended to look after their own flock across the brigade, but in practice each became associated with a particular battalion within the brigade. Out of the line, soldiers could attend the compulsory Sunday Church Parade of the brigade chaplain of their choice, but more often

circumstances meant that a chaplain had to serve the spiritual needs of men of a variety of denominational affiliations.

The chaplains tended to be older and better educated than the soldiers, but chaplaincy for many was their first experience of interacting with large groups of men who had little religious sentiment, experience or inclination. Soldiers often considered chaplains 'as an example of that Australian habit of paying lip-service to religion, of pretending that religion mattered here. When the chaplains first met their men they often received a profound shock.... Many idealistic young clergymen ... were not sure exactly what to do – and there was no one to tell them.'<sup>2</sup>

There was no handbook or job description for chaplains, but their function had formal and informal roles established by convention. They were expected to run divine services at compulsory, hence often unpopular, Sunday parades, as well as additional voluntary church services on Sunday, with Holy Communion according to their confession. In battle, chaplains at the front were to work alongside the battalion doctor at the aid post, helping with the wounded. After battle, their task was to visit the wounded and bury the dead with the appropriate rites, and often they shared the task of writing to the families of those killed. As a matter of course, chaplains were not expected to be in the front lines, and ordinarily were not to be exposed to enemy fire. Apart from these particular duties, they provided general spiritual and moral guidance to the soldiers.

Informally, roles as social organisers accrued to chaplains, as they had more free time than battalion officers weighed down with the administrative burdens of command. They were often elected president of the officers' mess, and appointed entertainments officer, responsible for the provision of wholesome recreation and diversions to the men, helping to maintain morale and building a moral framework justifying the conflict to engender commitment in the men. To do this they needed to radiate optimism, especially in the face of hardships and heavy casualties.<sup>3</sup>

While some chaplains worried that these tasks would interfere with their spiritual role, others saw them as a means of winning the trust of the men.<sup>4</sup> Battalion commanders often gave chaplains the tedious task of censoring the men's letters home. Some chaplains objected, but the men often preferred this to having their letters read by an officer responsible for discipline. One church newspaper in 1914 shrewdly observed of the chaplain's role, 'Just where the work in detail will begin and end is difficult to

say, but it is certain what may be called the *compulsory duties* are fairly onerous, and the *optional duties* have no limit.’<sup>5</sup>

In a freshly-raised army, inexperience was common among both officers and chaplains and roles had to be worked out in practice. Much depended on the relationship between battalion commander and chaplain, and in many cases unsympathetic officers or unsuitable chaplains made for a dysfunctional partnership. Officers could make a chaplain’s task difficult by ensuring that battalion tasks were scheduled just when the chaplain attempted to hold religious services.

A chaplain had an even bigger challenge gaining acceptance from ordinary soldiers, who viewed them as officers, as non-combatants, and as religious, three qualities often distasteful to secular, egalitarian Australian men, who characteristically viewed religion as being effeminate, overly moralistic and out-of-touch with practical real life. The Australian concept of manliness was largely divorced from religion.<sup>6</sup> However, while a study of British chaplains considered that the institution of chaplains was generally unpopular, a recent study of Australian chaplaincy notes the ‘positive relationship between chaplains and the AIF,’ showing that ‘there is a substantial body of evidence for the AIF’s appreciation of their chaplains’ pastoral and social concern.’<sup>7</sup>

Despite this, the Anzac legend has maintained a distinctly secular flavour, and pioneer Anzac historian Bill Gammage ‘concluded that the Australian soldier was indifferent to religion’ from his reading of Anzac diaries and letters.<sup>8</sup> However, there are a good many statements of religious sentiment in the personal papers of Anzacs, a number of which are actually quoted by Gammage,<sup>9</sup> while the present writer has found that more than half of the Anzac diaries he has read make comments of a religious nature. One chaplain, initially stunned by soldierly foul language, later reported that when it came to religion, ‘the Australian soldier is a “hypocrite” or perhaps to put it more mildly, a “camouflage artist,”’ arguing that soldiers were more religious than they made out to be.<sup>10</sup> A study of religiosity among British and American Great War soldiers shows great similarities in character to the AIF,<sup>11</sup> suggesting that the Anzacs were not distinctively more secular than their Anglophone counterparts, despite American culture generally being regarded as more overtly religious.

Chaplains and Soldiers: August 1914 to 24 April 1915

By the time the Anzacs landed at Gallipoli in the early hours of 25 April 1915, chaplains and their units had had several months to become acquainted. Chaplains were appointed to battalions in training in Australia, forming the first tentative relationships with officers and men. The sea voyage to Egypt allowed chaplains to establish themselves, as the more enterprising led out successfully in diversions for the bored ship-bound soldiers. The months in Egypt also permitted the nature of the relationships to be developed further. Again, the better chaplains like Walter Dexter, the Anglican chaplain of 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, William McKenzie, Salvation Army, 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Frederick Miles, Baptist, 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion, and Andrew Gillison, Presbyterian, 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion, earned the respect of the soldiers by accompanying them on route marches and tough training exercises, while less attuned chaplains played tourist around Egypt's many fascinating sites of religious and classical history, earning the derogatory nickname of 'Cook's tourists,' after the well-known travel agency.<sup>12</sup> But chaplains were also the organisers of sports competitions, concerts and popular lectures, which provided welcome relief from training, and helped divert at least some of the troops from the corrupting influences of the back streets of Cairo. Drawing on their higher standard of education, their sermons and lectures helped educate the men about the biblical and classical history of their surrounds. Even while sailing to Gallipoli, ship services focussed on the travels of St Paul and the Trojan wars that had taken place in those very waters and shores.

#### Formal Chaplaincy Roles at Gallipoli

The circumstances at Gallipoli were unique, changing the way in which chaplains carried out their duties. The narrow beachhead established by the British forces meant that there was no absolutely safe place to be, thus largely removing the distinction between front line and rear. Chaplains, alongside the higher command, had no choice but to operate under similar circumstances of risk and hardship as the soldiers. And being constantly on the move from the beach hospitals to the trenches on the ridges meant that padres could be more exposed to fire than troops garrisoning the trenches. One chaplain built a dugout that 'adjoined the biggest wire entanglement system opposite the enemy; it could not be farther advanced in the front line.' Putting himself at the forefront impressed the soldiers with his courage.<sup>13</sup>

However, as the seriously wounded were evacuated to Lemnos and Alexandria for treatment, many battalion chaplains were reassigned away from Gallipoli to work in

the hospitals, while during the course of the campaign other padres succumbed to endemic illnesses or combat stress, removing them from duty. Those who remained on the peninsula had to make up the gap by caring for multiple units. Hence the chaplains at Gallipoli were almost always stretched to the limit, and even beyond, in trying to fulfil their duties.

Virtually no chaplains came ashore in the first few weeks of the campaign. As non-combatants, they were ordered to stay on their ships, where their task was to help with the wounded evacuated from the beach. This presented them with challenges enough. Walter Dexter, himself an experienced and twice-decorated war veteran from his pre-clergy days, wrote of treating the wounded,

I wanted to bubble and cry and take them in my arms and sooth them, for their nerves were all racked as well as their actual wounds. Instead I joked with them and made them laugh, and gave them cigarettes to smoke while I pulled the hard bandage from the wounds. The grateful looks on their faces as the wounds were freshly dressed were something to remember.<sup>14</sup>

Tending the wounded, both on Gallipoli, and in the various hospitals on ships and ashore, was a key role for the chaplains, and their sensitive work was important in improving morale and helping soldiers to deal with the traumas of their wounds. One chaplain joked with a soldier who had a bullet ‘right through both cheeks of “where he sits down”’, leaving four holes, asking how he would answer young ladies who wanted to see returned soldiers’ battle scars. Soldiers listening on found this very funny.<sup>15</sup>

Only one padre, Father John Fahey, 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion, participated in the landings on 25 April 1915, and he experienced many dramatic moments in the first three weeks of the landings. The men on either side of him was killed on the beach, his clothing and equipment were repeatedly pierced by shrapnel, and twice he was half-buried by shell explosions, while on two other occasions objects in his hands were shot away.<sup>16</sup>

Fahey was a hardy priest, used to rough living on the Western Australian gold fields, and he adapted well to the conditions at Gallipoli, which won him great respect from the men.

As the first chaplains filtered ashore in early May, the potential to begin Sunday services emerged. However, the military situation did not permit it, for the line was

still unstable. A few services were held in late May, but it was not until June that the trenches settled into something of a routine as both sides ceased their major attacks and regathered their strength. A diarist wrote in late June, 'Church services are held everywhere but the more secluded spots are of course chosen. Most of our chaplains have now gone back to Alexandria to attend the sick.'<sup>17</sup>

William McKenzie, the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion chaplain, came ashore on 10 May, and cared for the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, as the other chaplains only came ashore in early June. On 23 May, he held his first church services, moving through the trenches and reading to the men in small groups, with a song service in the evening. An observer wrote,

Sunday after the bombing and noise it was very quiet about sunset and it was a wonderful sight. I watched it from a lookout and at the same time a Salvation Army Padre from Sydney was having a sort of small church behind the trenches on the side of a hill. It was great to hear the singing in the quiet of the evening with such a beautiful and peaceful sunset.<sup>18</sup>

A soldier recorded his first church service by another padre on the same day,

Went to Communion service at 7am this morning – [illegible], self and Gordon Crocker and about 20 or more – held in a little hollow of the hills – with the music of bullets for accompaniment 'Peace and good will towards men' what does it mean – kneeling there with the solemn words of the Chaplain – with death all around. One worries how God works it out.<sup>19</sup>

A surprising number of men recorded attending church services on Gallipoli – surprising given the secular reputation of the Anzacs and the fact that compulsory church parades could not often be held, hence attendance at the majority of Gallipoli services was voluntary. The number of men participating in these services indicates that there was a reasonable degree of personal commitment to church attendance among the soldiers. 'I have just come in from Church where the huge attendance sang splendidly,' wrote one soldier. 'The parson put up a decent show too and I came away quite relieved and cheerful.'<sup>20</sup> Another soldier repeatedly undertook a long and steep uphill hike from his station at the beach hospital to 11am services at Russell's Top.<sup>21</sup>

Padre Dexter recorded 'quite a crowd' emerging for a 9.30am service in the trenches, although initially they 'did not feel inclined to come but after the singing started, every possible man rolled up.' This was followed by Holy Communion, held in a tunnel just 70 yards from the Turkish lines. 'I felt myself back in old Christian days to the primitive Christianity when Holy Communion was celebrated in the Catacombs,' he noted. 'The only thing out of place was the thump of the shells on the roof of the tunnel. This the early Christians did not get.'<sup>22</sup> One battalion commander observed, 'On Sunday afternoons, a little after four, you would see the Padre coming down Shrapnel Valley, singing "Jesus, Lover of My Soul" and the lads coming out of the dug-outs like rabbits out of burrows and following him. When he got them into a comparatively sheltered corner he proceeded to lead them in a short Sunday afternoon service.'<sup>23</sup> Brigadier General John Forsyth of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade recalled being drawn from his dugout by the sound of 'one of the Church's grand old hymns' over the din of battle from a distant trench. He 'beheld some thousands of men grouped along the hillside'. He felt 'that the roar of the guns went in majestic but terrible harmony with the sound of that grand old hymn.'<sup>24</sup>

A soldier wrote to his mother, 'We had a Church parade today, a voluntary show which was awfully well attended. The men sitting outside their dug outs ready to jump in if anything happened along. The padre was very good and we had the usual accompaniment of rifle fire and a few guns.'<sup>25</sup> Many soldiers commented on the incongruity of holding church services on a battlefield, where the spectacular view over the sea, especially at dusk when services were often held, the trench setting, the sound of gunfire during services to the Prince of Peace, and the constant threat of shrapnel shells overhead could create a strangely awesome and almost mystical experience at times. A diary records of one, 'it was a very impressive service. The Dean [of Sydney, Albert Talbot] was in full regalia and the communicants knelt out in the open air, the hymn singing sounded very solemn and impressive. It must have carried to the Turkish trenches.'<sup>26</sup> A soldier wrote of another as,

the strangest I have ever attended.... [W]e commenced in the half light to sing the same old hymns which we have loved and sung so often – the minister leading off and the congregation joining in and from where I sat could be seen the beach and the sea beyond with a hospital ship lying off the land and stealing over the smooth bluish grey waters the sinister dark shapes of two destroyers on patrol duty.<sup>27</sup>

Chaplain McKenzie wrote of one service which seemed almost surreal:

as we sang the familiar Hymn 'Jesus, Lover of my soul, let me to Thy bosom fly' the strains of the grand helpful prayer wafted down and around the valley and was taken up by men on all sides, who were engaged on duty. The sentries standing on guard at the mouths of the trenches nearby with bayonets fixed likewise joined in the refrain and while we were singing 'Plenteous grace with Thee is found' a platoon of armed warriors marched right past us to take up their position in the support trenches and they too marched on singing 'let the healing stream abound, make and keep me pure within'. Men realise as never before that the most manly thing to do is to worship and glorify God.<sup>28</sup>

Many men recorded enjoying the services, both the preaching and the singing, and their diaries sometimes noted the subject of the sermon. Some attributed the interest in spiritual things as a consequence of their dangerous circumstances. 'I have never seen these men listen as they have done this day;' wrote one soldier,

notwithstanding their outward apparent callousness, these rough-hewn men have an undercurrent of thought which is only brought to the top on occasions such as this, when, more than anywhere else, they are brought face to face with the stern fact that 'we know not what a day or an hour may bring forth.' We sang 'Jesus Lover of my Soul' with even more fervour than we did the first Hymn.<sup>29</sup>

Yet others simply seemed to enjoy the services in their own right, rather than as insurance against the afterlife should they be killed. 'Finished the day off by going to Church and enjoyed the service very much,' wrote one. 'Lt Col McPhee conducts a nice church service at 7pm a few songs after,' commented another.<sup>30</sup>

With the scarcity of chaplains at Gallipoli, those present ran multiple services throughout the day. Chaplains took services for whoever was at hand, and Australian troops sometimes had British Army chaplains running services for them. These chaplains were often noted with approval, though one diarist was put out by one who spoke in 'that weird, unnaturally, pathetic voice and drawls in such an artificial way that makes one think that religion is after all only a professional stunt as it is served out to us.' Two weeks later he wrote again of the same preacher, 'He is easily one of



the old, old school; makes the sermon, in fact the whole service, as dull and melancholy as possible with the supreme idea that one's awful past and fear for the future punishment will bring them nearer the Church and God.' He considered it a medieval approach to religion, with no relevance to modern people.<sup>31</sup> Another soldier complained of a 'Church service this morning by a chaplain whom I do not know. He did not preach a very good sermon and most of his remarks were inaudible.' Other chaplains failed even more miserably through terrible judgement in their choice of message. One lost the respect of his audience when he foolishly attempted to argue 'that it was not so very dangerous fighting. That there were almost as many dangers in times of peace with trains, cars and orange peels of all things.'<sup>32</sup>

There were chaplains whose lack of courage, commitment, physical fitness and social adaptability marked them out as failures. Chaplain Walter Dexter, one of the AIFs most durable chaplains who maintained a voluminous and remarkably frank diary (with many instances of Anzac cowardice and misbehaviour recorded alongside the heroics), vented his opinion on padres who were too unfit, intolerant or inflexible to be effective.<sup>33</sup> Chaplain John Cope, when reassigned to Gallipoli from the Egyptian hospitals, failed to live up to his name, being convinced that he would be killed, and his Gallipoli letters show that he was clearly rattled, though he was there only during the relatively quiet month of December. His nervous conduct during 'creepy' night-time funerals must have done little to win the respect of the men.<sup>34</sup>

But a skilful chaplain could impress. The soldier who disparaged the drawling English padre wrote of another service, 'After tea Colonel Green, our "padre" came along and talked to us for a while; it was I suppose really a sermon but the pill was well concealed. He spoke of this place in connection with the Bible and the journeys of St Paul.'<sup>35</sup> Other chaplains preached on the importance of spiritual obedience to small duties over the large heroics, or the need for personal purity and innocence, or the need to live up to the good name that they had won themselves on Gallipoli. One padre boldly attacked, 'the "Australia for the Australians" mob' as 'awfully swelled-headed' while 'belittling, foolishly, those of the Tommy.' The diarist approved of this, saying that 'it raised considerable discussion amongst the boys, but it will do them quite a lot of good as we are hardly broad-minded and fair enough to our opponents or even our friends.'<sup>36</sup>

While there was some denominational friction, rivalry and exclusivity, more evident in base camps than on Gallipoli, most chaplains made an effort to make services as

inclusive as possible. On a hospital ship, a Roman Catholic padre of Belgian origin 'held a nondescript kind of service for all denominations. It consisted of two hymns, and address and the Lord's Prayer so no one could feel that there was any insidious attempt to undermine his religious principles.' Unfortunately, the 'very tuneless piano' and the priest's singing made the hymns 'particularly painful'.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the best efforts of the overworked padres, there were units which had no access to services, and soldiers recorded their disappointment at the lack. One soldier wrote on 13 June that they had not had a service since late April, which had been run on a ship by a Roman Catholic Christian Brother who was an enlisted man, not a chaplain. That same man ran a service that evening after dark under Turkish shellfire for a good sized crowd.<sup>38</sup> Another soldier accepted what he considered to be the 'impossibilities' of running front line services, which he had 'never seen or heard of,' yet bemoaned, 'but I did think we would be visited by Ministers in the trenches sometimes; but still I think I get as much satisfaction out of my own conscientious religion as I would if there were a Minister here.'<sup>39</sup> On other occasions, commanding officers held services in the absence of a padre. One brigadier offered a homily in lieu of a sermon, which he did not feel qualified to deliver. A listening officer judged it 'the best address I have ever heard on any similar parade.'<sup>40</sup>

The danger of shellfire was present at virtually all services. A service in June graphically illustrates the risks taken by men to attend. Although it was held after dark for added security, a shell knocked over a few men at the start. None was injured and the service continued. More shells burst overhead during the singing, and one man was wounded. 'The Church service was held spell-bound and silent for the few minutes that the above drama was being enacted,' a participant wrote. By the end of the service, five men had been wounded. 'Bad enough in all truth but still an astoundingly small total considering the number of shells and the crowd of men who came out from the dust and smoke unharmed, like the appearance of the wonders produced by Aladdin's lamp in the moving pictures.' The next day, he reflected in wonder, 'As I sit here in my private dug-out writing room, I cannot help thinking what a remarkable church service it was last night and how it was that only five men were struck down under the circumstances. "A Miracle".'<sup>41</sup> Many services were held under sporadic shelling, though some found that around 4 pm was the best time for services, when firing slackened as the Turkish evening meal was served. At times, no shelling

occurred during services, offering a welcome relief, while other services were curtailed by shell fire.<sup>42</sup>

There were still many soldiers who had reservations about the chaplains, but they never resented the burial services they conducted. Formal funerals were a great comfort to many men in dealing with the death of mates, as well as to their families at home. No matter how irreligious the Anzacs might have been, 'there was never indifference to the burial of the dead,' and the funeral services conducted by chaplains were quite often well-attended when circumstances permitted.<sup>43</sup> The chaplains were also involved with collecting the personal effects of the dead, recording them and ensuring that they were returned to the next of kin, as well as writing official letters to families of the deceased. This work could involve them in risky behaviour. A newly-arrived chaplain in mufti recorded overhearing two soldiers discussing the chaplains, unaware that he was one himself.

The padre was moving about in full view of the enemy, and was a very conspicuous figure. Chaplain Wray had a notebook and pencil in his hand, being evidently busy with the work of keeping a check of the names of the dead, and a list of their personal effects. Some men were waiting under cover, and I heard one say to another, as they looked back at the padre busy with his care for the wounded and the dead. 'I'll tell you who've done \_\_\_\_\_ good work here, these \_\_\_\_\_ parsons!'<sup>44</sup>

One soldier noted that even though it was difficult to recover the bodies and conduct a proper funeral, 'the Padre pretty well always [had] something said at the graveside, when the bodies [were] covered over.'<sup>45</sup> However, conducting a burial service was no easy task. Due to the dangers, most of the burial parties were conducted at night burial parties at night. 'We get away about 11 pm and back to our dug-outs any time from 2:30 to 8 am, according to the work to be done,' wrote one padre.<sup>46</sup> Chaplain McKenzie described the first burials he held at Gallipoli, two weeks after the initial landings:

I am kept very busy conducting burial services for the dead around here. Alas! I am kept much too busy in this line. I have had some thrilling experiences and had three narrow squeaks. Once a bullet grazed the top of my head, another my right ear, and afterwards I got nearly smothered with earth by the explosion of a big shell that fell

four feet from me.... Some of the bodies of those killed a fortnight ago are now being found and brought in for burial. It was very gratifying to find our colonel's body...after it had lain out for a full fortnight. We buried it at 9 p.m. after dark, as it lay in an exposed position. I had to kneel down and keep my head and body in a crouching attitude while reading the burial service. Hundreds of bullets swept over us while this was going on.<sup>47</sup>

In just ten days, he buried around 170 men. Another soldier's account notes burial services under a very heavy shellfire at Lone Pine. It was 'marvellous', almost a miracle, if there were a few or no casualties during the services.<sup>48</sup>

While in theory chaplains were supposed to bury their co-religionists, in practice burials were carried out by whoever was available, even across the great Protestant-Catholic divide, making an effort to conduct services that were acceptable to all. The compromises made chaplains uneasy, but they were aware of the need for tolerance given the situation. Both Catholic and Protestant chaplains ministered to Jewish soldiers, living and dead, and their efforts were accepted in good faith.<sup>49</sup> Their commitment to their work could reach extremes. Padre McKenzie buried about 450 men in the three weeks after the Battle of Lone Pine in August 1915, leaving him exhausted. 'My experiences of the first week are beyond telling,' he wrote:

I was worked to a frazzle for days and nights. I was in great pain from neuritis – all my reserved strength was used up and I could hardly crawl around except in pain and with sheer force of will and the aid of a stout stick. The officers urged me to go away, but I was determined to "stick it" and see it through until the regiment was relieved.<sup>50</sup>

Chaplains risked their own lives while engaging in these services, but the knowledge that their spiritual guardians fully shared their risks provided the soldiers with a sense of comfort and hope they desperately needed when death was ever present.

#### Informal Chaplaincy Roles at Gallipoli

The lack of a rear sector made it difficult to rest troops, or provide them with canteens and entertainments, responsibilities which normally would have fallen to the chaplains. Under the trying circumstances, the padres did their best to offer what social services could be managed on the peninsula. Those who spent time on Lemnos

often staged sports events and concerts as a means of providing restorative rest for the soldiers. However, often the most effective part of a chaplain's role was simple participation in the everyday life of the soldiers, and the efforts made by padres to ease the soldiers' lot. One chaplain won extra appreciation not just for his services, but also for being 'a real bonzer, he comes from Victoria and goes about in shorts just the same as us.' His work in tidying and maintaining the graves of fallen soldiers was also deeply appreciated.<sup>51</sup>

Padre Dexter held a service one Sunday then joined an informal football match as a ball was kicked from one hillside to another. 'The Chaplain made up for his lack of knowledge of the game, by using his weight and it was very funny to watch him,' wrote an observer. Playing football on the Sabbath may not have impressed strict churchgoers in Australia, 'but at wartime these things do not count.' Indeed, rather the opposite, incidents like this and his occasional surreptitious beer with the men merely added to Dexter's influence and effectiveness.<sup>52</sup> When it snowed in late November, Dexter cancelled services but started multiple snowball fights with everyone from members of G.H.Q. to cooks, finishing the day with a football match in a tunnel! 'It kept the men in good humour and made them warm,' he noted.<sup>53</sup> It was a brilliant piece of morale building, for the icy conditions made life miserable and affected the men's spirits.

One soldier recorded having 'yarns' with his padre, Father Murphy. When Murphy was evacuated with shell wounds, the soldier wrote of his replacement, 'Father Clune takes over the 5th Brigade, went to Confession & Communion today to him, not as nice as Father Murphy. He only left Australia in October.' Clearly, Murphy's battle experience and longer relationship made a difference in how he related to the men.<sup>54</sup> Chaplains who moved regularly through the trenches, stopping to socialise with groups of men, were almost always appreciated.

Many chaplains helped out informally wherever they could. Stretcher bearers and parties carrying bundles of supplies or the large and clumsy water cans up from the beach appreciated it when a chaplain like McKenzie grabbed a load and helped it over a difficult stretch. McKenzie was also liable to carry a man's pack just to give him a spell. One night, he cut steps into a steep and difficult part of the track in order to make movement easier for the men.<sup>55</sup> These additional tasks added to the formal work load, for funerals often took up much of the night. A typical day's work was often around 18 hours, much of it physically as well as emotionally arduous, hiking up and

down the steep hills, helping to dig and fill graves, and dealing with the traumas of the dead and wounded far more frequently than would the common soldier.<sup>56</sup>

Chaplains on rotation through Lemnos made a habit of buying up supplies of eggs, chocolates, matches, cigarettes, tinned foods and other treats to eke out the often monotonous diet of the soldiers. They also made efforts to supply the men with letter writing paper and envelopes, which meant that family in Australia received mail from their soldiers. One chaplain was concerned over the morale of men who never received mail, so he initiated a campaign for people in Australia to write to unnamed soldiers. Anticipating perhaps 100 letters a post, by the end of the Gallipoli campaign he was distributing thousands of 'To a Lonely Soldier' letters, adding enormously to his workload.<sup>57</sup> Padres wrote hundreds of letters to families of the wounded and dead, and answered many letters of enquiry from anxious relatives whose menfolk had neglected their own letter writing.

However, perhaps the most dramatic informal role of chaplains involved tending the wounded under fire. The example of Gillison is characteristic of a number who made a name for themselves for their courage in rescuing the wounded from No-Man's-Land. 'Gillison refused to take shelter, feeling bullet-proof,' wrote a friend of this legendary chaplain. 'He was a very popular padre, combining personal charm with boundless energy and fearlessness to the point of recklessness.' He also noted that 'Gillison was a frequent visitor to the trenches, and lived among the boys of his battalion. If a man was wounded, he was often the first to reach him, and apply first-aid, even before the stretcher-bearers could arrive.'<sup>58</sup> The senior chaplain, Colonel James Green, once 'shouted very vigorously' to Gillison, to take cover in a less exposed position, not knowing who he was. Gillison ignored him and continued his work in full view of the Turks, while a soldier said to Green; 'It is no use, Padre, you can save your breath. He is a chap who fears no bullet.'<sup>59</sup> One soldier wrote: 'Everywhere we hear Chaplain Gillison spoken of in terms of praise for his efforts to cheer the men under hardship and when wounded, and for his bravery in going anywhere under fire, especially during the first week or two here when danger and death lurked everywhere. He is the "whitest" man I have known.'<sup>60</sup> On 22 August, Gillison and two others ventured into No-Man's-Land at Hill 60 against strong advice to succour a man crying out in distress. Gillison and one of his comrades were mortally wounded, Gillison succumbing to his agonising chest wound several hours

later. His reputation was such that a new chaplain was still hearing awe-inspiring stories of him in late December, a full four months later.<sup>61</sup>

Other chaplains also exposed themselves to enemy fire. While the official station of a chaplain during an attack was the regimental aid post, Padre McKenzie followed behind the attacking companies at Lone Pine on 6 August, and in the trenches piled high with bodies he began sorting the living from the dead while the fighting swirled around him. 'That was the reason your church parades were so tremendously popular,' recalled some old soldiers in 1937. 'We were all ready to listen to the preacher who was not afraid to die with us.'<sup>62</sup>

It comes as no surprise that the soldiers began idolizing the padres, circulating myths which valorised them. One soldier reported a story doing the rounds, of Gillison being sniped while tending a wounded man in Shrapnel Gully. Eventually, he took off his Red Cross armband, picked up a rifle and disappeared in the scrub. He returned later, throwing the rifle down, picking up his Red Cross badge again and continuing with his work. The soldier wrote, 'He got his man. He was a crack rifle shot.' The same diarist claimed that an Italian chaplain led an attack on the initial landings when all other officers were killed.<sup>63</sup> Both stories belong to the realm of myth: Gillison never took up a gun, and there were no Italian Catholic chaplains in the AIF at Gallipoli. Similarly, McKenzie was credited with leading attacks in battles, almost winning a Victoria Cross, starting the riots that burned down the brothels of the Wazir district in Cairo in April 1915, and other unlikely deeds. A journalist wrote of McKenzie, "The men tell such strange stories of his heroism [...] but these brave fellows love him with a strange wonderful love."<sup>64</sup> But a close study of the myths surrounding McKenzie reveals that these claims have no sound basis.<sup>65</sup> Dexter overtly deflated myths about chaplains by writing that, 'Stories are told about myself and a couple of other chaplains leading charges on the first day here, which of course is piffle.' Chaplain Green explained the soldiers' tendency to exaggerate, 'The men greatly appreciate the work of the chaplain, and are overgenerous in their estimates. If you carry a fellow's rifle to help, or some such thing as that you "have led a charge".'<sup>66</sup>

In the end, the myths were only a reflection of the respect that the men on the battlefield developed for their chaplains, and the way that the padre embodied a friend, father, counsellor, spiritual figure and most importantly, hero.

Conclusions: Impact and Influence

Perhaps no formal role in the AIF was so thinly staffed as the chaplaincy. Padres were never numerous at the best of times, and the conditions at Gallipoli, Lemnos and Egypt spread them even thinner. Despite being few in number, they had a key role to play in the well-being of the AIF, and according to their capacity, were able to make a contribution out of proportion with their numbers. There were chaplains at Gallipoli who evaded responsibility and sought a quick exit from the peninsula. But what is striking is how many chaplains won the undying respect of the men through their devotion to duty, courage, cheerfulness and willingness to go the extra mile. Respect for their official positions as clergy also grew when chaplains treated all men as equals and took a non-sectarian approach to their ministry.

A few testimonies, in addition to those already quoted, demonstrate the important place that an effective chaplain could occupy in the hearts and minds of the men. One soldier wrote, 'Colonel McPhee turned up yesterday after a few month's absence. He is the padre (Protestant) who was with us on the 'Ionian', and is a real good sort, so we persuaded him to hold a special church parade for our Battalion this morning. It was the largest church parade that has been held on this Peninsula I should think.'<sup>67</sup> It is striking to read of soldiers requesting a church service, something that does not form part of the clichéd Anzac legend.

'Chaplain Gillison was idolised,' wrote one soldier, while another added, 'the sorrow of Officers and men at the death of Chaplain Gillison was deep and widespread. The Brigadier General, afterward Commandant of the entire AIF, wrote "He was the best loved man in the entire Brigade."' <sup>68</sup> The official battalion history noted,

He had a most engaging personality, and was the most popular man in the 4th Brigade. A man of exceptional courage, his kindness had endeared him to all ranks, and his death on an errand of mercy sent a cold chill through the hearts of the whole battalion. There was not any personal incident in the whole campaign which caused a greater sensation or gave rise to more sincere regret in the battalion.<sup>69</sup>

Of Padre McKenzie, a soldier reported, 'He spares no labour or weariness of body, mind or spirit to make the dear fellows happy and comfortable as circumstances will permit.'<sup>70</sup> A diarist considered him one of 'the two outstanding personalities' on the peninsula, alongside General Birdwood.<sup>71</sup> Decades later others recalled, 'Your endurance was simply astounding, and your courage and consecrated audacity amazed



the bravest of the boys,' while another claimed that his entertainments at Lemnos saved many soldiers from insanity or jail.<sup>72</sup>

Padre Bennett had two poems written about his work by his commanding officer, one an affectionate tribute to 'TP' – Bennett's initials, but also an abbreviation of 'the padre', and the second poem a moving account of Holy Communion celebrated in the trenches of Gallipoli.<sup>73</sup>

This study shows how chaplains played a vital role in providing a host of support services which could greatly impact soldier morale and emotional wellbeing. The myth that Australian soldiers were not particularly religious is nuanced by a demonstration that many soldiers took their faith seriously, and the ministrations of the chaplains benefitted the troops, even among those of little or no faith. The creation of mythic stories around chaplains indicates the respect in which many padres were held. It also demonstrates that the calibre of the individual chaplain was key to ensuring the success or otherwise of their role in maintaining the spiritual mission and morale of the troops, and shows in what specific ways chaplains could most impact the soldiers under their care.

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<sup>3</sup> Madigan, E. 2011: *Faith Under Fire: Anglican Army Chaplains and the Great War*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 99-114, 116-117

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<sup>6</sup> Crotty, M. 2001: *Making the Australian Male: Middle-class masculinity 1870-1920*. Melbourne: MUP, p. 6; see Madigan 2001 pp. 127-134 for a more detailed account of factors affecting chaplaincy popularity.

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